

“Breaking free”:

Marie de Gournay and Gabrielle Suchon on women’s position in society

In my talk, I want to analyse the philosophical position of two French women philosophers, who can be called feminists of the modern era, and who question the so-called natural hierarchy, which has been imposed for a long time in Western society and particularly in France: Marie de Gournay and Gabrielle Suchon. Marie de Gournay was a “woman of letters” and philosopher of the 16th and 17th centuries, who decided, as a single lady, to live from her writings. This decision, which did not bring her great wealth, earned her social scorn and misplaced jokes. However, she was well established in the intellectual and cultural circle in Paris. In 1622, she published *Égalité des hommes et des femmes*, and in 1626 *Les Femmes et Grief des Dames*, in which she advocated absolute equality between the sexes, by blaming the largely accepted superiority of men. Gabrielle Suchon is considered a moral philosopher and Catholic feminist. She lived in a convent for 25 years, before she ran away. Afterwards, she lived with her mother and worked as a teacher. In 1693, she published the *Traité de la Morale et de la Politique*, and in 1700 *Du célibat volontaire*. I will focus the analysis on the works mentioned above and on the *Petit traité de la faiblesse, de la légèreté et de l'inconstance qu'on attribue aux femmes mal à propos*, which was inserted in the *Traité de la Morale et de la Politique*.

Both philosophers have contributed, each in their way, to the reflection on the position of women in the still largely patriarchal society of their time. If Marie de Gournay is now understood as an important figure in the French *Querelle des femmes*, similar arguments can be found in Suchon’s work. Both philosophers point out the vices of their societies and denounce the wickedness of their fellow citizens. From this observation, they reflect on another way of living, especially for women, even if men are never left aside. For Gournay, the difference between men and women arises only because of different education, and are in no way linked to the sexes. This is why she demands the possibility for women to get a good education and to freely dispose of their thoughts. Suchon, on the other hand, thinks that in the traditional, accepted way of living for women, they have failed to realise their own basic human capacities. It is the artificial construction of the society which, in a way, prohibits women from freely disposing of their thoughts and developing them. That is why Suchon invents a third “category” of living for women, alongside marriage and life in the monastery. Women cannot freely

dispose of their thoughts, because their ways of life are pre-established, either by the rules of married life or by the rules of the monastery. This is why women should be allowed to choose voluntary celibacy: a neutral life. My objective is to point out the same starting point for their reflections, i. e. the vices of their society, and the different developments that their arguments take to finally defend the same position: women must free themselves from patriarchal rules, without falling into a revolution or excesses. The most important claim of both philosophers is that of an “intellectual”-fulfilled life even for women.